Walking Through the Pieces

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On the Spirit Across the Whole Bible, the Jewish Framework Underneath the Doctrine, and Becoming Living Wells in a Thirsty World

Doctrine as a Tool of Control

Let me begin with a statement that some readers will find provocative. Doctrine is sometimes an abusive tool used by the powerful to control people.

Now I want to be careful here. I am not saying that all systematic theology is illegitimate, or that careful theological articulation is unimportant. Some of the most pastorally generous voices across Christian history have produced careful doctrinal work. What I am naming is a pattern (historically frequent, observable in many traditions) in which doctrine becomes the litmus test by which the powerful within a religious community determine who is inside and who is outside the boundary of acceptance.

People say to me sometimes: “Rob, you do not preach doctrine. You should teach this doctrine or that doctrine.” And my hesitation has not been that doctrine is unimportant. My hesitation has been that topical doctrinal preaching has a tendency to overemphasize certain elements of the biblical witness at the expense of others. The overemphasis often produces guilt about things the broader scriptural context might have given allowance for, or releases people from accountability about things the broader scriptural context would have held them responsible for. Doctrines, in this mode, become instruments by which power decides who counts.

And one of the doctrines that has been used most heavily as a litmus test of who is inside or outside the kingdom of God is the doctrine of the nature and characteristics of God. As if we (finite creatures, working with limited language, peering into the infinite) all know the full nature, character, and expression of God. As if the Creator could be exhaustively codified in our human formulations. I want to take us on a different kind of journey through the chapter: a journey through the Hebrew Scriptures looking at how the Jews actually thought about God, how the Messiah Jesus thought about God, and how we as New Testament believers ought to think about God now that the Holy Spirit has been poured out into the earth.

The Breath in the Beginning

In the beginning, God formed man out of the dust of the earth. And he breathed into man the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

It is almost like God was the first one to administer CPR. He leaned over the dust-formed figure and breathed life into its lungs. And the dust became living human being.

The Hebrew word for that breath is ruach, pronounced “rua” with a deep throat-sound at the end. The Greek equivalent in the Septuagint is pneuma. And this same word (ruach, breath) is used a few verses later in Genesis 3:8, when it says “they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” The Hebrew phrase translated “cool of the day” uses the same root as the word for breath. God was present in the garden as a breeze, a breath, a movement of air, the same atmospheric presence that had filled the original man’s lungs at his creation.

The Spirit of God in the Hebrew Bible is not principally a philosophical category. It is the breath, the wind, the atmospheric movement that signals God’s actual presence in a specific

location. When the Hebrew Scriptures speak of the Spirit, they are speaking of the way God's presence becomes perceptible, the way the air changes when he is near.

The Raven and the Dove

And then humanity falls away. The corruption of the human race deepens. And by Genesis 6, God announces that he is going to bring a flood to destroy all flesh. He gives one hundred years of advance notice, one hundred years during which Noah is building the ark and presumably preaching repentance to the surrounding generation. They do not repent. The flood comes.

And after many days of floating with the animals, God inspires Noah to send out two birds to check whether the waters have receded enough for living things to find dry land. Watch the sequence:

> Then he sent out a raven, which kept going to and fro until the waters had dried up from the earth. He also sent out from himself a dove, to see if the waters had receded from the face of the ground. But the dove found no resting place for the sole of her foot, and she returned into the ark to him, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth. (Genesis 8:7–9)

A raven and a dove. The raven is sent first, and the raven does not return, because ravens are scavengers. A raven will happily settle on any floating dead carcass and feed on it. The raven finds plenty of resting-places among the dead bodies floating on the receding floodwaters, and does not need to come back to the ark.

But the dove cannot find a resting-place. The dove will not settle on dead things. The dove waits for living vegetation, for actual life-bearing earth, before it will rest. And the first

time Noah sends out the dove, no such place yet exists. The dove returns to the ark, having found nothing alive.

A week later, Noah sends the dove out again:

“Then the dove came to him in the evening, and behold, a freshly plucked olive leaf was in her mouth; and Noah knew that the waters had receded from the earth” (Genesis 8:11).

An olive leaf. The first sign of new life emerging from the receded waters. The dove has found a living thing, an olive sprout pushing up through the wet ground, and brings the evidence back to the ark. And a week after that, Noah sends the dove out a third time, and the dove does not return, because by then there are enough living, breathing places that the dove can settle.

Keep this raven-and-dove imagery in mind across the rest of this chapter. The dove is the bird of new creation: the bird that will not settle on death, the bird that waits for life and signals it when it arrives. And the same dove imagery will return at one of the most significant moments in the New Testament narrative.

Abraham and the Pieces

And after the flood, the human pattern of fallenness reasserts itself. Noah, having survived the deluge, plants a vineyard, drinks of the wine, and ends up naked in his tent, the same kind of nakedness Adam had experienced in the garden (Genesis 9:20-21). The devil, somehow, hitched a ride on the flood. The human family remains broken on the far side of the catastrophe.

And God learns something across these opening chapters of Genesis. Or, more carefully; God demonstrates across these opening chapters that judgment does not produce the human transformation that is actually needed. Destroying humanity does not fix humanity. The flood

was real and necessary, but the flood did not produce the new kind of human being that the original creation had been pointing toward.

So God tries a different path. He calls Abraham.

> Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1–3)

In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That is the new mechanism. Not judgment. Blessing. The redemption of the surrounding human race is going to happen through the slow expansion of blessing rather than through the swift destruction of the unrighteous. And Abraham, a seventy-five-year-old man with a barren wife, is called to leave Ur, the great metropolitan city of his moment, and to wander out into a land of milk and honey that God has promised but not yet shown him.

And here is a striking thing the Apostle Paul says about Abraham’s blessing centuries later:

> Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us . . . that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Galatians 3:13–14)

The blessing of Abraham is the promise of the Spirit. Hold that. The Old Testament promise, “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” turns out, by Paul’s reading, to be a promise of the Spirit being poured out on every nation through Christ. The Genesis 12 blessing and the Pentecost outpouring are the same promise, viewed from different historical moments.

Galatians 3 names them as a single divine commitment that took millennia to come to its full unfolding.

And there is a song from one of the corny 1980s Christian bands that I remember from my younger years. It had a refrain, “it won’t be water but fire next time.” And every time I hear that refrain, I want to push back. God’s plan for humanity is not principally fire. The fire is what we go through every single day: the adversity, the trouble, the suffering. That is the fire. That is the burning-away of what is not like him. But God’s actual redemptive plan is not the next great destruction. It is the blessing of Abraham, the promised Spirit, poured out continuously into the surrounding world until every family of the earth has been touched by it.

Walking Through the Pieces

And Abraham himself has one of the most striking divine encounters in the entire Old Testament, and it directly involves the Spirit-presence we have been tracing. In Genesis 15, God instructs Abraham to make a covenant by the ancient Near Eastern ritual of slaying animals, cutting them in half, and arranging the bloody pieces in two rows on the ground:

> Then He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. (Genesis 15:9–10)

The bloody pieces are arranged on the ground. And the way these covenants worked in the ancient Near East is that a powerful king would tell a vassal king, “We are entering into an agreement together. To ratify the agreement, you will slay these animals, you will cut them up, and you will walk through the bloody pieces. By walking through them, you are saying: if I

break this covenant, may I be made like these animals, cut up and dead. The walking-through is the formal acceptance of the covenant's consequences if you break it."

And Abraham is the lesser party in this transaction. He is the one who would, by the standard protocol, walk through the pieces. But just as the moment comes for Abraham to perform the ritual:

> Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him . . . And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram. (Genesis 15:12, 17–18)

A smoking oven and a burning torch passed through the pieces. Not Abraham. God himself. The cloud and the fire, the same atmospheric Spirit-presence we have been tracing from Genesis 2, passed through the bloody pieces. And what God was demonstrating to Abraham was something staggering. "Abraham, your descendants are going to go down into Egypt. They are going to be enslaved. They are going to come out by a mighty hand. They are still not going to be faithful to me. I know all of this. And I am the guarantee of the covenant. You cannot keep it. Your descendants cannot keep it. I am passing through the pieces in your place. The covenant rests on my faithfulness, not on yours."

That is the breathtaking inversion at the foundation of the entire biblical covenant structure. The party who would normally walk through the pieces was the party who would suffer the consequences of breaking the covenant. And God walked through the pieces in Abraham's place: accepting, in advance, the consequences of every covenant-failure that Abraham's descendants would commit across the coming centuries. The cross of Christ was

prefigured in this moment in Genesis 15. The cloud and the fire that passed through the pieces was the same Spirit-presence that would, centuries later, be poured out on the bloody body of the Son of God.

The Cloud Goes Before

And the same cloud and fire that passed through the pieces in Genesis 15 reappears the night Israel comes out of Egypt. On Passover night, the lambs are slain, the blood is painted on the doorposts, and the death-angel passes over the houses of Israel. And the next morning, when Israel walks out of slavery alive and well, what is in front of them:

> And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people. (Exodus 13:21–22)

The pillar of cloud. The pillar of fire. Same atmospheric Spirit-presence that had passed through the pieces in Abraham's vision. God is saying: "I am fulfilling, in real historical time, what I promised to your father Abraham. My presence will go before you. I am the guarantee of the covenant."

And when the people get to Sinai, the same atmospheric Spirit-presence wraps the mountain in cloud, fire, lightning, voices, and trumpets (Exodus 19:16-20). And the people are terrified by the manifestation. They do not want to hear the voice of the Lord directly. They send Moses up alone: "You go up, go up without us. Speak to us, but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." The Spirit-presence of God was, at that moment, so overwhelming that the people preferred mediation to direct encounter.

And Moses, alone on the mountain, receives the pattern of the tabernacle. The portable sanctuary that will travel with Israel through the wilderness. And at the very center of the tabernacle (past the outer courts, past the holy place, behind the veil in the holy of holies) the same atmospheric Spirit-presence will dwell above the cherubim of the ark of the covenant. The Shekinah, the indwelling glory, settling on the mercy seat between the two cherubim. The arrangement deliberately echoes the Garden of Eden, where two cherubim were placed to guard the entrance after Adam and Eve were expelled (Genesis 3:24). The presence of God is once again protected by cherubim, but now there is, at least once a year on the Day of Atonement, a way for the high priest to enter and stand before that presence on behalf of the people.

And whenever the Spirit-presence rises up from the tabernacle, the priests pack up the tent and follow. That is the Old Testament pattern of guidance. The Spirit moves; the people follow. The Spirit settles; the people settle. The cloud-and-fire that Abraham had seen passing through the pieces is the same cloud-and-fire that leads the wilderness journey day by day.

The Glory Departs and Follows the Exiles

And eventually the tabernacle gives way to the temple. Solomon builds the great Jerusalem temple, and the same Shekinah presence settles in the holy of holies. The atmospheric Spirit-presence that had filled the original tabernacle now fills the permanent stone-and-cedar structure on Mount Moriah.

But the people continue to sin. They continue to break the covenant Abraham's God had passed through the pieces to guarantee. And in Ezekiel 1-11, Ezekiel (already a captive in Babylon, already separated from the Jerusalem temple by a thousand miles of desert) sees the glory rise up from the altar, move to the threshold of the temple, move to the temple gate, move to the city gate, settle on the Mount of Olives outside the city, and then begin to move east

toward Babylon. The Spirit-presence is leaving the Jerusalem temple. And the direction it is leaving in is the direction of the exiles.

Think about what comfort Ezekiel must have felt at that vision. He was the captive. He was the one separated from the promises. He was the one whose physical distance from the temple looked like spiritual distance from God. And the vision told him exactly the opposite. The Spirit-presence was not staying in Jerusalem with the corrupted priests. The Spirit-presence was following the exiles into Babylon. The captives were closer to the actual presence of God than the temple-staff who had remained in Jerusalem.

If you are in exile right now (geographically, relationally, spiritually) the Ezekiel pattern matters. The Spirit-presence is not staying with the institutionally comfortable while abandoning the exiled. The Spirit-presence has a track record of going with the exiles, accompanying the displaced, settling in the place of greatest pain rather than in the place of greatest privilege.

And eventually the temple itself is destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. The physical building that had housed the Shekinah is leveled. But the Spirit-presence is not bound to the building, and Daniel, also in Babylon, has a vision in which the kingdoms of this world are leveled by a stone cut without hands, and the kingdom of God fills the whole earth (Daniel 2:34-35). Despite what appears to be the complete opposite of the covenant's fulfillment, something is still being accomplished. Despite all observable evidence, the Spirit-presence is still operating.

Mary, Overshadowed

And four hundred years pass between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New. Four hundred years of silence, no canonical prophetic voice, no temple Shekinah, no visible manifestation of the atmospheric Spirit-presence that had defined the Old Testament narrative.

And then one day, an angel appears to a young Jewish woman named Mary:

> And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35)

The Holy Spirit will come upon you. The power of the Highest will overshadow you. The Greek verb for “overshadow” (episkiazō) is the same verb used in the Septuagint for the cloud that overshadowed the tabernacle in Exodus 40:35: “the cloud overshadowed the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” Luke is signaling that what is happening to Mary is the same Spirit-presence that filled the original tabernacle. The atmospheric overshadowing has returned to Israel, but now in the body of a young Jewish woman rather than in a curtained tent in the wilderness.

And what is conceived in Mary is not merely a child. What is conceived in Mary is the body that the Shekinah will indwell across thirty years of Jesus’s human life before his public ministry begins. Jesus’s body is the new tabernacle. The new temple. The new dwelling-place of the Spirit-presence that had been seeking a permanent indwelling-place since Genesis 2’s breath into the dust-formed Adam.

The Dove Descends Again

Jesus grows. Luke 2:52 tells us “he increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” Across thirty years of ordinary Jewish life in Nazareth, the indwelling Spirit-presence develops within him toward the public manifestation that is coming.

And then, at about thirty years of age, he goes out to the Jordan River where John the Baptist is baptizing. And John immediately recognizes something different about this particular candidate:

> And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. (Matthew 3:14–16)

The Spirit of God descending like a dove. The bird of new creation from Genesis 8 has returned. The dove that had been waiting for a resting-place since Noah's flood has finally found the resting-place it was looking for: a human body in which the Spirit-presence can dwell continuously, without departure, without intermittent visitation. The dove that would not settle on death has settled on the One who is about to defeat death.

And John the Baptist had explicitly anticipated this distinction:

"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11).

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Spirit-presence that had baptized Jesus at the Jordan was going to be poured out from Jesus into others. The indwelling Spirit that had settled on the Son of God would be transmitted from the Son to the entire people of God across the surrounding world. That is the announcement underneath the dove's descent. The Spirit has found its resting-place in Jesus, and from that resting-place, the Spirit will be transmitted to whoever is willing to be baptized by the Mightier One who comes after John.

Out of His Belly Shall Flow

And Jesus made the transmission explicit in John 7. Listen:

> On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (John 7:37–39)

Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Notice the geography of the transmission. The water flows from Jesus into the believer who drinks of him. And then, from the belly of the believer, the same water flows outward into the surrounding world. We do not just drink. We become wells. The transmission is two-staged. First we receive. Then we become channels through which others can also receive.

The Greek verb for "flow" in John 7:38 is present-continuous tense. Out of the believer's heart shall continuously flow rivers of living water, not a one-time outflow, but a sustained flow that operates continuously across the life of the believer. Once the Spirit takes up residence, the flow does not stop. The believer becomes a permanent geographical feature in the surrounding spiritual landscape, a perpetual well from which the surrounding thirsty world can draw.

And John's parenthetical note is critical. "But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified." The transmission of the Spirit from Jesus to believers was conditioned on Jesus first being glorified: That is, on Jesus first completing the work of cross and resurrection. Until Jesus had passed through death and emerged on the far side, the Spirit could not be transmitted in the way John 7 was anticipating. The crucifixion and resurrection were the historical events that opened the channel through which the Spirit would flow outward.

Pentecost as the New Sinai

And the Spirit's actual transmission begins, in earnest, at Pentecost. Acts 2:

> When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1–4)

The same atmospheric Spirit-presence (wind, fire) that had wrapped Sinai in cloud and trumpet-blast in Exodus 19 is now distributing itself into individual human bodies in Acts 2. Each disciple becomes, in effect, a new Mount Sinai. Each receives the divine fire on his or her own tongue. Each becomes a portable indwelling location for the Spirit that had previously been concentrated at the single geographical point of the original Sinai. And the result is multiplication. Where Sinai had produced one nation through one mediator, Pentecost produces a multinational community of indwelt believers across every language and culture represented in the Acts 2 crowd.

And the languages mentioned in Acts 2:9-11 are the same nations listed in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10-11. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Mesopotamians, Cappadocians, and so on. The list is Luke's deliberate signal that the Spirit-outpouring at Pentecost is the reversal of the Babel-scattering in Genesis 11. What had been scattered by language at Babel is being gathered by language at Pentecost: every nation hearing the wonderful works of God in its own native tongue, with the Spirit performing the translation that mere human linguistic effort could not have performed.

God is so consumed with communicating with humanity that he speaks to every nation in the language each nation understands. The Spirit's translation work at Pentecost is the prototype of every cross-cultural mission ever attempted by the church across the subsequent centuries. The Spirit makes the gospel hearable in whatever vocabulary the surrounding listener is fluent in. He does not require the listener to learn a foreign theological language before being able to receive the message. He meets the listener in the listener's own tongue, the listener's own culture, the listener's own way of thinking about the world.

Why I Hesitate About the Trinity

Let me now name something directly that I have been circling around. I hesitate to teach the doctrine of the Trinity as such. Not because I deny the reality the doctrine is trying to articulate. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all real, all present, all operative in the divine work of redemption that the Scripture describes. I worship the Father. I follow the Son. I am indwelt by the Spirit. But the historical doctrine of the Trinity, as formulated in the fourth-century controversies and codified in the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds, was, by my reading, substantially a Platonic philosophical adaptation imposed on the underlying Jewish-scriptural witness.

Plato had articulated, centuries before Christ, a framework in which the divine operated through the "First Cause," the "Logos" (the rational principle that gave shape to reality), and the "Pneuma" (the breath or animating spirit). And when the early church fathers, working in a Greco-Roman intellectual environment, attempted to articulate the Jewish-Christian witness in terms their surrounding culture could understand, they reached for the Platonic categories ready at hand. The result was a theology that was genuinely useful in its missional context, but that was

also, in subtle ways, shaped by philosophical assumptions the original Jewish writers of Scripture did not share.

And one of the practical effects of the doctrinal formulation has been the use of the doctrine as a litmus test for orthodoxy. “Do you believe in the Trinity? If not, you are outside the boundary of acceptable Christian faith.” Anyone who tells me that I must believe a stated mystery (something that cannot be explained, articulated only through technical philosophical vocabulary) in order to be saved, I am going to check my wallet, check whoever is at the gate, and ask what is actually being demanded of me.

The Jewish framework underneath the Christian witness is, I think, simpler and more pastorally generous. The Father is the source of all: “all in all,” as Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:28. He sent his Son, the Messiah, into the world, as Psalm 2:6-7 had anticipated, “I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion. I will declare the decree: the Lord has said to Me, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” And the Spirit is the divine breath that proceeds from the Father, that rested fully on the Son at his baptism, and that is now poured out into believers across every nation.

That is the framework I am working with. Father, Son, Spirit: held together in the relational unity the Scripture describes, without requiring philosophical scaffolding that the original Jewish writers would not have recognized. I am not trying to start a doctrinal fight. I am trying to free us from being held hostage by formulations that historical accident produced and that the surrounding tradition has sometimes used as instruments of control.

Now hear the practical implication of all this. Psalm 2 invites us, “Kiss the Son” (Psalm 2:12). And the Hebrew imagery of kissing the Son is concrete. A kiss is an intimate exchange of breath. To kiss the Son is to allow the Son to breathe his Spirit into us, the way God originally

breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2. The Son is the embodiment of God on the earth. To kiss him is to receive the breath of God directly from the One who has been carrying it on our behalf. Let him breathe life into you. Do not wait for me, or any other doctrinal authority, to lead you into all truth. The Spirit himself, indwelling you, is the One who has been promised to lead you into all truth (John 16:13).

Hunger for God, Not Hunger for Doctrine

What you need, in my honest pastoral assessment, is a hunger to know God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. You need to journey on the pilgrim-stranger journey the writer of Hebrews describes in chapter 11: walking out in faith, like Abraham, into a land you have not yet seen. And you will learn, both how to trust God and what to trust God about, by doing the actual walking, not by mastering doctrinal formulations in advance.

There is something that happens in the walk of faith that the indwelling Spirit empowers and that no amount of theological mastery can substitute for. We have become sons and daughters of God through the Spirit, not through ascending the doctrinal mastery hierarchy. And when we sing ("Holy Spirit, come") we are not principally invoking a philosophical category. We are inviting the same atmospheric Spirit-presence that breathed into Adam, that walked through the bloody pieces with Abraham, that led Israel through the wilderness, that filled the tabernacle, that overshadowed Mary, that descended on Jesus at the Jordan, that was distributed at Pentecost; we are inviting that same Spirit-presence to do in our specific local assembly what he has been doing across thousands of years of redemptive history.

Let us be a fruit-filled people in a thirsty world. This world is a desert. It is suffering. It is in pain. Let the fruit, let the water of the Spirit of life that is in Christ Jesus, flow through us and through me into this surrounding world. Ezekiel 47's vision of the temple-river growing deeper

as it flows outward, until it reaches the Dead Sea and brings life to even the lifeless waters, is exactly what God is doing through every individual believer who has become a well rather than just a drinker.

Blessing, Not Bitterness

And let me name something about the speech-pattern of indwelt believers, because the Spirit-pattern produces a particular kind of speech in those who have received him.

The book of Hebrews, in chapter 12, gives a sustained address to people on a pilgrimage toward the celestial city. And one of the central commands in that chapter is this:

"Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled" (Hebrews 12:15).

Lest any root of bitterness spring up. The pilgrim community on the way to the celestial city is, by the writer's diagnostic, in particular danger from interior bitterness that can spread to defile the surrounding community. And the indwelling Spirit's natural fruit is not bitterness. The Spirit's fruit is blessing: life-giving speech, words that build up, prayers that reach toward the surrounding world's pain with intercession rather than condemnation.

Our hearts ought to be breaking right now for Muslim men and women who have lost their children in the recent earthquake in Turkey and Syria. That is the speech-pattern of indwelt believers. Our hearts are broken by the suffering of humanity wherever the suffering shows up, not just within our own theological tribe, not just within our own national borders, but across every population we can pray for. We pour out prayers that, in the whole economy of God, work their way into the situations of need we may never personally visit.

And I am, by my own honest admission, a grumbler. Grumbling is partly a family trait I inherited: I was raised in a household where if someone burned us, we burned them back, and the

grumbling was the maintenance-mechanism of the family's emotional accounting system. And the kingdom of God is a different operating system. The new Spirit that has been kissed into our mouths the day we walked out of slavery alive and well, that breath that was given to us, produces a different kind of speech. Blessing rather than grumbling. Building rather than tearing down. Bitterness is not the kingdom of God. Bitterness is the old self that the indwelling Spirit is slowly displacing across the years of our pilgrimage.

The River From the Throne

And the chapter that opened with Genesis 2's breath into the dust-formed Adam closes, necessarily, with Revelation 22's river from the throne:

> And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1–2)

A pure river of water of life, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. Same water Jesus had been speaking about in John 7. Same Spirit that had been flowing through Israel's history from Genesis onward. The Spirit that was given from the Father to the Son is now flowing out of the throne where the Father and the Son sit together, and the trees on either side of the river, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, have leaves for the healing of the nations.

And the same chapter announces what God is principally about to do with the nations:

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. That is what God is principally doing with the nations. Not pouring out bowls of judgment. Not waiting impatiently for an opportunity to smite. Wiping away tears. We call things in our surrounding world “acts of God”: earthquakes, hurricanes, calamities. That language is a slander on his character. The acts of God are the deliverance and the salvation and the modification of woundedness and the healing of the broken. That is what God is principally up to. The healing of the nations, not the cursing of the nations.

Closing

So let us be the people of God in this world. Let us be moved by the Spirit. Worked by the Spirit. Made fluent by the Spirit in the languages of the surrounding world’s pain.

There are times when we get clear here (when the music is playing, when the testimonies are washing over us, when the word begins to wash over us) and the whole purpose of that washing is so that we can go out into the surrounding world and be exactly who God has called us to be. The thing that genuinely angers me is when Christianity continues to misrepresent the God of heaven as someone who is angry, ticked off, and waiting to smite everybody. God is not a smiter. He is a Refiner, and the refining is for our restoration rather than our destruction. Let us not pour out the vials of hell on everybody. Let us pour out the vials of blessing instead, the bowls of prayer that Revelation 5:8 names as the prayers of the saints rising up as incense before the throne.

Our words have an effect on changing the world. The Spirit who indwells us is the same Spirit who was breathed into Adam, who passed through Abraham’s pieces, who led Israel through the wilderness, who overshadowed Mary, who descended on Jesus, who was distributed at Pentecost, and who now flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb through every believer

into the surrounding nations. Let our words be words that raise rather than words that drag down. Let our prayers be prayers that bless rather than prayers that curse. Let our lives be wells from which the surrounding thirsty world can draw the same water of life we have been drinking from for as long as we have been believers.

Holy Spirit, come. Be present with us. Make all the difference. Let us be a fruit-filled people in this surrounding desert. And let us watch what the Spirit does, across whatever years we have remaining, with the small portion of the surrounding world he has authorized us to bless. Amen.